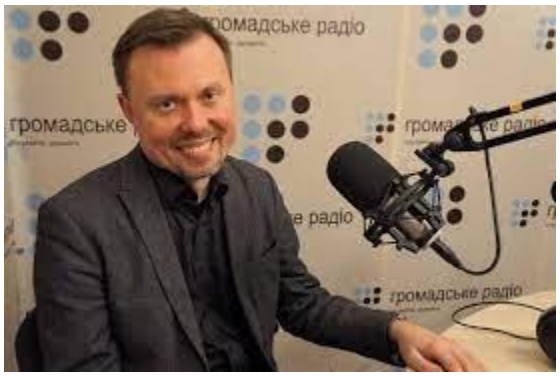
Ukraine Insider, Part 1

Why Russia Started the War, and How Putin Misunderstood Ukraine

Professor Andrii Portnov

This article was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

About the author:



Andrii Portnov is Professor of the Entangled History of Ukraine at the European University Viadrina (Frankfurt/Oder), Director of the PRISMA UKRAÏNA Research Network Eastern Europe and a member of the Ukrainian PEN-Club. He graduated from Dnipro University (M.A. in History) and Warsaw University (M.A. in Cultural Studies), and defended his PhD dissertation (2005) at the Ivan Krypiakevych Institute for Ukrainian Studies in Lviv. Since 2012, Professor Portnov has conducted research and lectured at the Universities of Basel, Cambridge, Geneva, Potsdam, Free University Berlin, Free University Brussels, Humboldt University of Berlin, SciencesPo Paris, SciencesPo Lyon, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, Institute for Advanced Study (WIKO) in Berlin. He has published and co-edited ten books and numerous articles on the intellectual history, historiography, genocide and memory studies in Poland, Russia and Ukraine. His latest book is "Polen und Ukraine. Verflochtene Geschichte, geteilte Erinnerung in Europa" (Berlin, 2022).

Summary and key points of the article:

- The article explains the fundamental importance of the historical distortions that guide Russian President Vladimir Putin's thinking on Ukraine.
- According to this worldview, Kyiv is devoid of its own separate agency and instead represents a battleground with the West as Moscow's main self-designated enemy.
- Russian public opinion has been heavily imbued with the perception that Russians and Ukrainians are part of one nation.
- A key pillar of the development of Ukrainian nationhood consisted in the resistance to the imperial designs of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, which underscores Ukraine's tradition of "imperial opposition".
- Soviet leaders – unlike Putin, recognized and tried to accommodate the power of Ukrainian nationhood.
- Since 1991, Ukraine has implemented a peculiar model of post-Soviet pluralism and political competitiveness, transcending the so-called "East-West" identity split frequently ascribed to the country.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the morning of February 24, 2022, came as a surprise to many. Perhaps even more surprising was the firm resistance of Ukrainians, who prevented Russia's blitzkrieg plans and withstood the attempted "decapitation" of Ukraine's government. After more than half a year of the ongoing war we still need to identify clearly the nature and the logic of Putin`s aggression as well as to reflect on the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Ukraine that enabled its resistance against one of world's biggest armies and a nuclear state.

Putin's "historical" arguments and their genealogy

For Putin, Ukraine as an independent political entity and a separate culture does not exist. He believes that, politically, Ukraine is a misunderstanding, a side effect of faulty Soviet policies and Western intrigue, and that culturally and historically it is simply part of "one" Russian nation. He has expressed these views repeatedly, most meticulously in an article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," published on June 30, 2021.[1]

This article, as well as Putin`s other speeches, stresses the notion of "historical rights." It is not even that this category is interpreted in a purely selective manner (for example, in the case of Crimea, the more-than-three-hundred-years history of the Crimean Khanate is ignored, but the annexation of the peninsula by the Russian Empire in 1783 and its consequences are emphasized in every possible way). **It is fundamentally important that *manipulative talk about "historical rights" substitutes respect for international law* and internationally recognized borders (including those of Russia itself).**

Putin's "historical" arguments are neither new, nor original. In his nearly hour-long speech on Russian state television on February 21, 2022, addressing the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" and de facto proclaiming war on Ukraine, he actually repeated all the main points from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1990 pamphlet "*Kak nam obustoroit` Rossiyu*" (the title of English translation was "*Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Solutions*"). In this deeply conservative and imperialist text, the Nobel laureate in literature and former GULAG prisoner assumes that Ukraine belongs to Russian history and to the Russian people, and describes the country's independence, or its "separation" from Russia, as a "consequence of an eclipse during the communist years".[2]

On September 30, 2022, Putin concluded his speech on Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian regions with a quote from Ivan Ilyin, the ultraconservative philosopher who praised Hitler's rule and wrote an essay "On Russian Fascism" back in 1928. Ilyin (who had a notable influence on

[1] Putin, V., 2021, 'Стаття Володимира Путіна «Про історичну єдність росіян та українців»' ('Article by Vladimir Putin "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians"')
[2] Solzhenitsyn, A., 1990, ,'КАК НАМ ОБУСТРОИТЬ РОССИЮ?' ('How should we develop Russia?')

Solzhenitsyn and Putin), in turn, continued the line of 19th century Russian Slavophilism with its ideas of a "triple Russian people," "historical territories," and a "primordial struggle with the West." **Thus, Putin's ideological lexicon relies heavily on archaic 19th- and early 20th-century constructs that see the root of evil in the "collective West".**

On December 30, 1999, a day before his predecessor, President Boris Yeltsin, announced his premature resignation, Putin published a now largely forgotten article "Russia at the Dawn of a New Millennium".[3] This essay listed the most important components of the "Russian idea": patriotism, sovereignty, statehood, and "the turn to collective forms of living", in contrast to the individualism prevalent in the West.

Shortly after Putin took office as president in 2000, one of his first symbolic political decisions was to reintroduce the anthem of the USSR as the Russian national anthem. In 2003, the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky symbolized the concentration of both economic and political power in Putin`s hands. And successful military campaigns became an effective way for his regime to increase public support and consolidate society, as it already happened in 2000, with the Second Chechen War; in 2008, with the war in Georgia; and in spring 2014, with the annexation of Crimea.

The so-called Crimean consensus marked a moment of new legitimacy for Putin's regime. By "returning" Crimea to Russia with almost no military effort Putin symbolically put himself on the same level as the imperial "land-gatherers", Peter the First and Catherine the Second. The Crimean consensus found its (il)legal continuation in the constitutional reform of 2020, which allowed Putin to remain president until 2036 – de facto for life. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was apparently intended to further strengthen this legitimacy. The Russian president hoped for confirmation primarily through an easy and convincing victory – not only over Ukraine, but over its supposed "overlord", the collective West. A quick victory was also intended to bring about the ultimate recognition of Russia's historical agency.

"The collective West" as Russia's main enemy

According to Russian political scientist Kirill Rogov, it is the ideology of a radical break with the West that stands behind Putin's war.[4] In his Kremlin speech about the annexation of Ukrainian territories Putin himself made this point clear. **According to this logic, Ukraine has no agency of its own, it is just a battlefield with "the collective West".**

[3] Putin, V., 1999. 'Россия на рубеже тысячелетий', *Независимая газета*, 30 декабря 1999 г. ('Russia at the Dawn of a New Millennium', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 December 1999).
[4] Martynov, K., 2022, '«Люди начинают играть в поддержку войны»', *Новая газета Европа*, 7 июня 2022 г. ('"People are starting to play in support of war"', *Novaya gazeta Europe*, 7 June 2022)

In 2007, Putin ended his programmatic speech at the Munich Security Conference with the following words: "Russia is a country with more than a thousand years of history, and it has always had the privilege of pursuing an independent foreign policy".[5] The coming years showed that he also envisaged the use of military means for this purpose: shortly after the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, at which Ukraine and Georgia were denied the prospect of joining the alliance (interpreted in Moscow as a sign of Western reluctance to protect the two post-Soviet states), Russian troops marched into Georgia. The response of the West was pretty weak, it assisted the Georgian leadership in accepting peace on Russia's conditions.

By a coincidence of historical circumstances, Putin's rise to power in 1999 coincided with NATO's military intervention in the former Yugoslavia, which later led to the proclamation of Kosovo's independence. As some scholars argue, Western politics towards Kosovo were a turning point for the post-Soviet Russian leadership.[6] **Putin continuously raises the issue of Kosovo to justify his aggressive politics in Ukraine, and directly compares the NATO operation at that time to the ongoing Russian "special military operation".** Ukraine, thus, has not recognized the independent Kosovo till nowadays.

For the Kremlin though, Ukraine has no "true" independence since 1991. One of Putin's closest associates and former president of Russia, Dmitriy Medvedev, publicly called on October 11, 2021 Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and his government "weak and completely disinterested people without stable self-confidence," and added: "It makes no sense for us to negotiate with vassals. We have to deal with their sovereigns".[7] This quote is a direct answer to the question of whom the Russian leadership now believes it is at war with.

Popular roots of Russia's foreign politics

As Andrey Zorin recently noted, the perception of the events between 1989 and 1991 that dominates the Russian public's consciousness is "not Russia's liberation from Soviet totalitarianism and its imperial legacy, but as a defeat at the hands of the West in the Cold War".[8] The success of the dissemination of such perceptions may be traced back to the fact that Russian national consciousness

[5] Putin, V., 2007, 'Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности' ('Speech and discussion at the Munich Conference on questions of security policy')

[6] For more details see Morozov, V., 2009, *Rossiya i Drugie: Identichnost' i granitsy politicheskogo soobshchestva* (*Russia and the Others: Identity and Boundaries of a Political Community*), Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, pp. 315–382.

[7] Medvedev, D., 2021, 'Почему бессмысленны контакты с нынешним украинским руководством', *Коммерсантъ*, 11 октября 2021 г. ('Why contacts with the current Ukrainian leadership are meaningless', *Kommersant*, 11 October 2021)

[8] Efimov, A., 2022, '«Устаревшие представления становятся обоснованием массового убийства людей» Почему война с Украиной — логичное продолжение российской идеологии. Объясняет историк Андрей Зорин', *Медуза*, 30 марта 2022 г. ('"Outdated ideas become the justification for the mass murder of people" Why the war with Ukraine is a logical continuation of Russian ideology. Historian Andrey Zorin explains', *Meduza*, 30 March 2022)

had not freed itself from either imperial or Soviet captivity and the post-Soviet borders of the Russian Federation were seen as unnatural and historically unjust. In 1997, 56% of the Russians considered Ukrainians and Russians to be one nation, (in 2002, this number reached 76 %, in 2004 – 79 %).[9] In other words, Putin's rhetoric both relied on and further shaped public opinion. Simultaneously, the imperialist nostalgia of significant parts of the population allowed Russia's political elites to justify the authoritarian development of their country by claiming that otherwise, that is, with more political freedom, there was a risk of state collapse.[10]

The dangerous historical trap of such reasoning is that military failures have been triggers for political change several times in Russian history. For instance, the failed Crimean War in the mid-19th century was followed by liberal reforms, and Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 contributed decisively to Nicholas II's loss of legitimacy, which led to the 1905 revolution and ultimately to his abdication in 1917.

Modern Ukraine: The ethnographic principle as an anti-imperialist choice

Putin is not the only one who failed to grasp the phenomena of modern Ukraine.[11] Like any other national project in the 19th and 20th centuries, Ukraine symbolically referred to the medieval and early modern state entities. In the Ukrainian case, these were primarily the Old (or Kyivan) Rus' of the 10th – 12th centuries and the Cossack project within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th – 18th centuries). After the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, the territories of the future Ukraine were divided between two empires – the Russian and the Austrian. *It was precisely in this constellation that the vision of modern Ukraine was born.*

The Ukrainian national project in the 19th century formulated *a claim to cultural autonomy for all territories with predominantly Ukrainian-speaking peasant populations*. Such an approach enabled what at first glance appeared to be a rather innocuous cultural project to transcend imperial boundaries and unite cultural activists in both the Russian and Austrian empires. **The very fact that the Ukrainian movement, with its claim to "ethnographic borders", developed in two competing empires made it resistant to imperial policies.** For example, the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, founded in 1596, was banned in the Russian Empire, while it continued to exist in Austria. Ukrainian books, which were not allowed by the Tsarist censors, were published in the Austrian Lviv.

[9] Data are taken from Dubin, B., 2011, *Россия нулевых: политическая культура, историческая память, повседневная жизнь* (*Russia of the 2000s: Political culture, historical memory, everyday life*), Moscow: Rosspen

[10] Furman, D., 2010, 'От Российской империи к русскому демократическому государству' ('From the Russian empire to the Russian democratic state') in: *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, Vol. 5, p. 47

[11] For a general overview of Ukrainian history see Plokhy, S., 2015, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine*. Basic Books; Yekelchyk, S., 2007, *Ukraine. Birth of a Modern Nation*, Oxford University Press; Magocsi, P. R., 2010, *A History of Ukraine. The Land and Its Peoples*. University of Toronto Press

This possibility of playing with imperial competition made the history of the Ukrainian movement different from that of Belarus, which was entirely within the Russian Empire.

The first modern Ukrainian state projects were carried out in 1917–1921. Immediately after the February Revolution, the Central Rada was established in Kyiv, proclaiming socialist and federalist ideals, including "national-personal autonomy" for Russians, Poles, Jews, and other national minorities. The full independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) was not declared until January 9, 1918, in response to the Bolshevik army's military offensive on Kyiv. The Western Ukrainian People's Republic (ZUNR) was proclaimed on October 19, 1918 in all former Austrian territories with predominantly Ukrainian populations. Both Ukrainian republics were militarily defeated, in the East by the Bolsheviks, in the West by the Polish army.

Eastern Galicia with its main city Lviv became part of interwar Poland. Most Ukrainian territories were integrated into the Soviet Union. After defeating Ukrainian political opponents on the battlefield, ***Lenin recognized the strength and potential of the Ukrainian national movement.*** For tactical reasons, he insisted on conceiving the new Soviet state as a federation of formally equal republics, and one of them was Ukraine.

Soviet Ukraine

In establishing Soviet Ukraine as one of the founding members of the Soviet Union, Lenin recognized the power of the Ukrainian national movement. Of course, Soviet Ukraine was heavily dependent on Moscow's policies; however, it had many, at least formal, elements of its own statehood. Nevertheless, Ukraine was particularly affected by Stalin's policy of famine (also known as the Holodomor in 1932–33), as well as by severe repressions against Ukrainian culture.

The bitter historical irony is that it was Stalin who brought about the "reunification of Ukrainian territories" and turned the centuries-old dream of the "unity of Ukrainian ethnographic territories" into political reality. This unification took place during the Second World War, first in 1939 and finally in 1944–45. Postwar Soviet Ukraine was the first state in the country's history to encompass Lviv and Donetsk, Uzhgorod and Odesa within the same borders.

The Soviet Union waged a merciless struggle against the anti-Soviet nationalist underground, tended to Russify the Ukrainian language and remove numerous cultural figures from the Ukrainian historical canon. **Nevertheless, *the Soviet state had never abandoned the idea of state-sponsored institutionalization of "nationality" as a mandatory legal category based on a person's ethnic ancestry*.** Moreover, from its inception and until its demise, the USSR remained, as American sociologist Rogers Brubaker put it, "a formal ethnoterritorial federation of republics defined as

commonwealths of and for particular nations."[12] Ukrainian Soviet statehood was rather a form without content, a matter of show (in this role, the Ukrainian SSR became one of the founding members of the UN, along with the Belarusian SSR and the Soviet Union).

Independent Ukraine as a laboratory for diversity and pluralism

The Soviet Union ceased to exist at the end of 1991. In its dissolution, Ukraine and its party elites played an important, if not decisive, role. There were strong miners' strikes, visible national manifestations, but still **the emergence of the Ukrainian state in 1991 was possible only through a compromise between the National Democrats and a significant part of the Communist Party nomenklatura.** In other words, the new state did not emerge from a revolution, but was built on the foundations of the old Soviet institutions. This led to serious economic and political problems, but compared to neighboring Belarus and Russia, **Ukraine developed a particular model of post-Soviet pluralism and political competitiveness.** Since 1991, Ukraine has elected six presidents, of whom only Leonid Kuchma managed to be reelected. Moreover, the falsification of the referendum and geopolitical decisions made without proper public discussion led to two mass protests in Ukraine, two Maidans – the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan of 2013–2014. Was the first Ukrainian Maidan a belated catch-up with the Central European revolutions of 1989? In any case, both in 2004 and 2014, the EU refused to promise Ukraine an integration perspective, not even symbolically…

In 1991, all people living in Ukraine, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or linguistic background, became full citizens of the young state. At the time, numerous observers predicted the country's imminent collapse and pointed out the regional "divisions". The thesis of "two Ukraines" and the conviction that the Russian-speaking population would be politically loyal to Russia seemed plausible to many. The first days of Putin's war showed how simplistic and far-fetched these conceptions are. Otherwise, Russian-speaking Ukrainians would have defected *en masse* to the side of the occupiers, and the Ukrainian government would have soon yielded to the pressure of Russian aggression. Why didn't this occur?

Ultimately, **Russia's attack conclusively demonstrated that *Ukraine has formed as a sovereign nation with a specific model of political loyalty and identity that cannot be reduced to language or religion*.** Even in the face of the invasion, diversity did not prove to be a weakness: religious and linguistic differences did not undermine the unity of the country. To understand this, it is necessary to finally get rid of simplistic transfers of the Swiss or Canadian models to Ukrainian

[12] See Brubaker, R., 1998. "Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism," in Hall, J., ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 272–306.

reality: **in Ukraine, there is no clear geographical or historical border between the Russian and Ukrainian languages.** According to various surveys, about 35–40% of the population speak only or mostly Russian or only Ukrainian, respectively, and about 20% claim to use Ukrainian and Russian equally. In Ukraine, a particular model of situated bilingualism can be observed, in which Ukrainian is predominant in education and Russian in politics and economics.[13]

A new, more adequate description of Ukrainian diversity is needed. It is time to dismiss stereotypical phrases about a "looming split" and to rethink the country's diversity – and by no means only in terms of language – as a crucial source of political pluralism. Unlike neighboring Belarus and Russia, Ukraine has developed a tradition of political competition and continuous transitions of power over the course of its history since 1991. A perfect embodiment of this tradition is Ukraine's current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected in 2019 with a clear majority across Ukraine. Zelensky comes from a Russian-speaking Jewish family living in the southeast of the country. His decision to remain in Kyiv after the Russian invasion, despite the strong advice of leading Western intelligence agencies to leave, can hardly be overestimated in its symbolic value.

War in Europe: local and global dimensions

Russia's war against Ukraine is perceived by President Putin as an act of "strengthening [his country's] sovereignty" and a "preventive" and "protective" response to the "existential threat from the collective West". The large-scale Russian aggression that began on February 24, 2022 became a new stage of the war that the Kremlin started in 2014 by annexing the Ukrainian Crimea and initiating the war in the Donbas region. After February 24th this war turned into a genocidal war in the heart of Europe, which aims at destroying Ukrainian statehood and society. The elements of genocidal politics are the filtration camps for Ukrainian citizens, forceful deportations of Ukrainian children into Russia, destruction of cultural heritage and burning of Ukrainian school books.

Actually, the attitude to Ukrainian identity differentiates Putin from all Soviet rulers (including Stalin). **If the Bolsheviks acknowledged the relevance of Ukrainian national project and strived to modify and integrate it (using both repressions and promotion) into the Soviet system, Putin totally underestimated it, thus falling into a trap with naïve hopes to occupy Kyiv in three days with almost no resistance.**

If Putin still thinks of Ukraine in terms of 19th century ideological dreams, the country itself shows a complex fascinating example of creating and promoting modern pluralistic identity.

[13] On language politics and the general linguistic situation in Ukraine, see: Moser, M., 2013, *Language Policy and the Discourse on Languages in Ukraine under President Viktor Yanukovych*, ibidem Press/Columbia University Press; Kulyk, V., 2013, 'Language Policy in Ukraine: What People Want the State to Do', in: *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 2, pp. 280–307.

Keeping in mind the disastrous and long-lasting impact of the ongoing war on both Russian and Ukrainian societies, one should not forget that it has not just local but also a global dimension: it calls into question the existing architecture of international security and international law, the principle of the inviolability of borders and the (non-)proliferation of nuclear weapons. The search for new responses to all those challenges will be an extremely important and difficult task for the entire world.